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No pink slips for teachers in Santa Cruz City Schools

By SHANNA MCCORD

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SANTA CRUZ -- Not a single pink slip will be handed out to teachers in Santa Cruz City Schools this spring, marking the first time in a decade the district has avoided the dreaded tradition of laying off staff in anticipation of state budget cuts.

District leaders say they are poised to financially survive the 2011-12 school year and avoid layoffs, despite unprecedented fiscal challenges statewide that have brought sweeping cuts to schools across California.

"The board has been very responsible and conservative in managing the budget," Superintendent Gary Bloom said. "We're pleased to create an environment in which teachers don't have to worry about their jobs."

A few factors have contributed to City Schools' ability to dodge pink slips. These include the district sitting on an 11.3 percent reserve, not spending the \$1.2 million in one-time federal stimulus money all districts received last year, slashing \$5 million from the budget last year and shortening the 2010-11 school year by a week, Bloom said.

City Schools, with 425 teachers and 7,000

students, is one of the only districts in the county to skirt layoff notices this year.

Pajaro Valley Unified has already approved 200 pink slips, including 150 teachers and 50 classified workers. Scotts Valley Unified is expected to hand out a small number of notices. Other smaller districts are also expected to make cuts. Live Oak handed out pink slips for 7.5 teachers this week and San Lorenzo

Valley sent out notices for 3.4 positions.

Laying off teachers in the spring for the next school year has been a regular part of the budgeting process for nearly all districts, a way to cut staff in the event that state funding comes up short. Notices are required to be sent out in March.

City Schools has been going through the layoff drill repeatedly since 2001, Bloom said.

Last year, City Schools gave out 82 pink slips, though the majority of those teachers were called back to the job after a new, better-than-expected budget was crafted.

Not everyone is rejoicing at the lack of teacher layoffs, at least not yet.

With Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to hold a June special election on extending tax increases still up in the air, school districts could face additional cuts of \$330 per pupil if the extensions don't win voter approval.

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Without the tax extensions, many districts could face additional layoffs in the fall, though City Schools is confident the reserves will pull it through regardless of the state situation.

Barry Kirschen, head of Greater Santa Cruz Federation of Teachers, said he won't be relieved until the layoff notices City Schools sent to its Adult Education staff last week are rescinded.

"I'm not celebrating yet," Kirschen said. "We're still concerned about the outcome of the governor's budget proposal. We're not out of the woods yet."

Still, teachers and counselors in City Schools say they're relieved they don't have to withstand the worry of not knowing if they'll have a job in the fall.

Some, especially the new ones, have received a layoff notice year after year.

Santa Cruz High School counselor Zach Joseph said he's been through the pink slip drama two years in a row. This year is a huge relief, he said.

"It is hard, especially when I love my job and the goal is to keep doing it," Joseph, 37, said. "It's hard to be completely settled in a position funded by the state budget. I do feel more secure that I did a year ago at this time."

Dodging layoffs is something City Schools can only promise for the 2011-12 school year. Looking down the road three years, the district is expected to exhaust its reserves unless the

state's budget picture improves.

"We're willing to take the risk to respect the teaching profession and ensure parents that their child's education is secure," board President Cynthia Hawthorne said. "You cannot run schools without bringing back the teachers. This is a budget we think will come out OK."

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